



Extra Virgin Olive Oil Guide

Learn the secrets to spot a quality extra virgin olive oil.

Olive oil is an universe made of thousands of oils, not one, produced using different “varietals” or “cultivars”, olive varieties, from almost every corner of the world, from Spain to Italy, from Australia to USA, from Palestine to Tunisia and every olive oil has its unique characteristics given by the olive variety, type of mill and climate, that make it better suited for a particular food or cuisine, with the general rule of delicate oils going with delicate food and more intense oils with richer, flavoursome food.

Extra virgin olive oil, which our guide focuses on, is one of the most fascinating ingredients in the culinary world, yet it is often overlooked or undervalued. Much like wine, where each grape variety imparts unique characteristics, every type of olive produces a distinct extra virgin olive oil. It's an ingredient with endless nuances, deserving the same level of appreciation we reserve for fine wines or gourmet foods. Too often, however, we make the mistake of pairing high quality meats, fish, or fresh seasonal vegetables with the cheapest olive oil, assuming that they are all the same, undermining the flavours of an otherwise exceptional meal. Before diving into how to taste and evaluate extra virgin olive oil like a professional, let's first define what it is. An extra virgin olive oil is the highest grade of olive oil obtained directly from the first pressing of the olives and only using mechanical processes, without the use of chemicals to extract the oil, and with an acidity not exceeding 0,8%.

At the pinnacle of the olive oil pyramid is extra virgin olive oil (EVOO), the highest quality oil, its low acidity (under 0.8%) and robust flavour profile make it ideal for both seasoning and cooking. Next comes virgin olive oil, rarely found. Like extra virgin olive oil, it is produced from the first pressing, but it has a slightly higher acidity (up to 2%) due to the use of lower quality olives and less nutrients. Below virgin olive oil is olive oil, a more affordable option with a mild, almost bland taste. It is primarily used as a neutral cooking oil. At the base of the pyramid lies pomace oil, the lowest grade. Made from the remnants of olive pulp after the initial extraction, it is produced using chemical solvents and heat. Pomace oil is the cheapest option, lacking the flavour, aroma, and health benefits of higher-quality oils. It is typically used for industrial purposes or high-heat frying.

Extra virgin olive oil is produced across the globe, from north to south, east to west, each region imparting its unique characteristics to the oil. However, as an Italian specialist, it's important to highlight the exceptional qualities of Italian extra virgin olive oils before delving into the universal process of olive oil tasting.

Italy's extra virgin olive oils are renowned for their diversity and quality, and they are protected under two key certifications: DOP and IGP.

- **DOP (Denominazione d'Origine Protetta)** : This designation guarantees that the oil is made from specific olive varieties grown in a defined area and pressed in a mill within the same region. Italy boasts 41 DOP certified extra virgin olive oils, each reflecting the unique terroir, climate, and olive varieties of its origin.
- **IGP (Indicazione Geografica Protetta)** : Italy has a single IGP-certified olive oil: IGP Tuscany. This certification ensures that the oil originates from Tuscany and adheres to strict quality and production standards, highlighting the region's long-standing tradition of olive cultivation.

Italian extra virgin olive oils are prized for their variety of flavours, from the robust and peppery oils of Tuscany to the fruity and mild oils of Southern Italy. These certifications not only protect the authenticity of Italian oils but also preserve the heritage and craftsmanship behind each bottle. With this understanding of Italian excellence, we can now explore the stages of tasting and assessing extra virgin olive oil, a process that applies universally to oils from every corner of the world.

Due to the current EU legislation, it's possible to find extra virgin olive oils labelled as “Bottled in Italy” that are actually made from a blend of European or Mediterranean oils or olives. In these cases, the “Bottled in Italy” claim refers only to the location of the bottling plant or mill, not the origin of the olives or oils themselves. These products are typically the cheaper Italian extra virgin olive oils found on supermarket shelves. While the true provenance of the olives or oils must be disclosed, it is usually tucked away and not immediately visible to consumers.

By contrast, Italian extra virgin olive oils labelled as “100% Italian” are made exclusively with olives grown in Italy, ensuring authenticity and a higher standard of quality. When selecting a good Italian extra virgin olive oil, expect to pay no less than £15 per liter. Investing in a good extra virgin olive oil

not only ensures superior flavour but comes with plenty of health benefits.

Italian extra virgin olive oils showcase a remarkable diversity of flavours and characteristics, shaped by the region and olive variety. One such variety, Leccino, is cultivated across Italy and highlights the country's regional nuances. Broadly, Italian extra virgin olive oils can be classified into three main groups based on their geographical origin: northern, central, and southern oils.

- **Northern Extra Virgin Olive Oils:** Fresh, Delicate, and Fragrant. Northern oils are lighter, more delicate, and perfect for people who prefer a gentle touch rather than a peppery kick. Ligurian olive oil, often made from the Taggiasca olive, has a sweet, almond-like note and a silky texture. Around Lake Garda, you'll find oils with grassy aromas and a subtle pepper finish - ideal for drizzling over fish, salads, or fresh focaccia without overpowering the food.

- **Central Extra Virgin Olive Oils:** Balanced and Bold. Central oils are not too light, not too strong, but full of character. Central Italy's climate is a mix of hills, valleys, and coastal influences, giving olives a balanced flavour profile. Tuscan oils, especially from cultivars like Frantoio, Moraiolo, and Leccino, are known for their bright green colour and robust, slightly bitter taste with a peppery bite that lingers in the throat. These oils are perfect for grilled meats, hearty soups like ribollita, or just a chunk of bread.

- **Southern Extra Virgin Olive Oils:** Rich, Fruity, and Intense. Puglia, thanks to its endless groves of varieties like Coratina and Ogliarola. Coratina, in particular, is famous for its intense bitterness, high polyphenol content (great for health), and long peppery finish. This is the kind of oil that bites back - in a good way. In Sicily, you'll find oils that can be green and grassy or surprisingly fruity, with hints of tomato, herbs, and even tropical notes depending on the variety (Nocellara del Belice and Biancolilla are local stars). Southern oils love bold company - think roasted vegetables, pasta alla norma, grilled fish, or even a drizzle on pizza straight out of the oven.

Extra virgin olive oil is much more than just a cooking ingredient - it is a powerhouse of health benefits. Packed with antioxidants, particularly vitamin E, it stands out among plant oils for its high content of monounsaturated fats, the healthy fats that support heart health. It also has the lowest levels of polyunsaturated fats, the less desirable fats that can contribute to inflammation when consumed in excess.

Beyond its nutritional value, extra virgin olive oil is also beneficial for hair health, helping to nourish the scalp, strengthen hair, and add natural shine.

In addition to these healthy fats, extra virgin olive oil is rich in polyphenols, a natural compounds with strong antioxidant properties. Medical research suggests that a diet high in polyphenols may help protect against chronic conditions such as certain cancers, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and neurodegenerative diseases. Polyphenols also play a key role in promoting:

- **Antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects**
- **Neuroprotection, helping to maintain brain health**
- **Improved insulin sensitivity and heart health**
- **Support for gut bacteria, enhancing digestion and overall wellness**

The polyphenols in extra virgin olive oil also give it its characteristic bitter taste - a quality that many may not appreciate, but one that signals the presence of these beneficial compounds. **A good extra virgin olive oil should have a slight bitterness and a mild pungency in the throat**, which are indicators of high polyphenol content and overall health benefits.

On the other hand, oils that lack this bitterness—often referred to as "flat"—are low in polyphenols and, consequently, lack the full range of health benefits.

Historically, when extra virgin olive oil was considered a luxury, people often consumed it as a daily supplement, taking a spoonful each morning for its health-promoting properties. Even today, many continue this tradition, recognizing the oil as a valuable addition to a healthy diet. Extra virgin olive oil is not only a versatile cooking ingredient but also a rich source of nutrients that can contribute to long-term health and wellness.

Another key factor in determining the quality of olive oil is the mill where it's produced. While stone mills are often romanticized as producing superior olive oil, this is not necessarily the case. The main issue with stone mills is that they tend to generate more heat during the crushing process, and there is significant exposure to oxygen. This results in an oil that is lower in antioxidants, less healthy, and with a shorter shelf life.

It's important not to be swayed by the belief that the "old" methods of olive oil production are inherently better. In modern mills, the extraction process takes place in controlled environments that minimize exposure to oxygen and regulate other critical parameters. These mills are designed to preserve the freshness, flavour, and nutritional value of the oil, ensuring that the final product is of the highest quality.

A high quality extra virgin olive oil starts with perfect olives - those that are undamaged, picked before they reach full ripeness, and processed as quickly as possible after harvest. Ideally, the olives should be milled within a few hours of being picked to preserve their freshness and ensure the highest quality oil.

This careful approach results in an olive oil with very low acidity, a high concentration of polyphenols (though their exact levels can vary depending on the olive variety), and all the other beneficial compounds that contribute to its exceptional flavor and health benefits. The result is an oil that is not only rich in nutrients but also bursting with vibrant taste and aroma.

Extra virgin olive oils are then classified according to their fruitiness. According to the International Olive Council (COI), the adjective fruity indicates the presence of the typical fragrance of healthy, fresh and harvested olives at the right degree of ripeness and are classified in:

Fruttato Leggero (lightly fruity)

Fruttato Medio (medium fruity)

Fruttato Intenso (intense fruity)

The fruttato, fruitiness, of an extra virgin olive oil varies according to when the olives are picked, the olives ripeness, the mill used and lastly, the cultivar, the olive oil variety that produce the olive oil, each with a variety's distinctive characteristics, exactly like grapes.

A fruttato leggero is characterized by slight bitter and spicy sensations. These are delicate oils perfect for simple dishes with a delicate flavor such as salads, raw or boiled fish and also for pastry. Examples are the extra virgin olive oils from the north of Italy.

Fruttato Medio is characterized by a good balance between bitter and spicy. These oils stand out for their nose of tomato combined with pleasant herbaceous and sometimes balsamic notes. Ideal for dishes with balanced flavors such as soups, grilled vegetables, cooked shellfish, blue fish or stewed fish and fresh cheeses. Examples are olive oil from Abruzzo, Calabria and Sicily.

Fruttato Intenso, characterized by pronounced aromas with marked bitter and spicy notes. These oils stands out for their strong vegetal notes reminiscent of artichoke and for the perfect balance between bitter and spicy. They are perfect for dishes with a bitter tendency such as salads with a strong flavor such as those with rocket or radicchio but also grilled meats. Examples are olive oils from Tuscany and Apulia.

These are the different aromas and flavours we can find in an extra virgin olive oil:

Olives

Green, right ripening, ripe

Fruity

Unripe, ripe, apples, bananas, citrus fruits, berries, exotic fruit

Dried fruit

Almond, hazelnut, walnut, pine nut

Unripe vegetables

Grass, olive leaf, artichoke, thistle, unripe tomato

Vegetable

Ripe tomato, aubergine

Aromatic spices

Rosemary, mint, oregano, floral, chilli

Before we dive into the olive oil tasting process, here are a couple of essential tips for preserving and enjoying your extra virgin olive oil:

1. **Packaging Matters:** Good extra virgin olive oil should always come in dark bottles, as light can damage the oil and diminish its quality. Avoid buying olive oil in plastic bottles, as they are more prone to contamination and degradation.
2. **Use It Fresh:** Once opened, unless stored in a bag in box, oxidation begins, which means the oil will gradually lose its flavour and health benefits. There's no point in saving your oil for special occasions - use it within a reasonable timeframe to enjoy its peak quality.

Now that you know how to store your oil properly, let's move on to the fun part: tasting!

Tasting olive oil can be an enjoyable and enlightening experience. To start, gather three different extra virgin olive oils with distinct characteristics - perhaps one mild, one medium, and one robust. Pair these oils with a simple food, like a boiled potato, which acts as a perfect neutral base.

As you taste each oil, you'll notice how the flavours interact with the food. Some oils may feel too intense, others too subtle, while some will perfectly complement the potato. This experiment will help you appreciate the diverse flavour profiles of extra virgin olive oil and allow you to begin distinguishing the differences between varieties, just as experts do.

But if you fancy tasting like a professional, get a small glass, olive oil is tasted by drinking it, and a green apple, possibly the Granny Smith variety that due to its acidity is perfect to clean our palate between olive oils.

Visual Analysis

The visual aspect in the evaluation of an extra virgin olive oil is not important, the colour is irrelevant except for the identification of the type of olives used. The different shades of colour (from green to yellow) are mainly due to the ripeness of the olives and the cultivar, olive variety, used and extraction method.

Olfactory Analysis

Pour a small amount of oil (about 20 ml) in the glass and with one hand cover and the other warm the glass for a minute or two whilst swirling. When the oil reaches our hand temperature, stick the nose in the glass and take a deep sniff. The “nose” will tell us its qualities, fruttato, and defects.

Gustative Analysis

Take a sip, don't be shy, you need enough olive oil to be able to appreciate all its qualities. Suck air through, this allows the oxygenation of the oil and capture its aromas, making sure the oil touches all areas of your palate, then swallow some or all.

The peppery sensation, called pungency detected in the throat, is very important and is a positive characteristic, and these are the polyphenols, the chemical compounds that provide stability and have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects. The pungency goes from very mild to intense.

Finally, have fun and discover great extra virgin olive oils and learn how and when to use them. Below some of the terms used in describing extra virgin olive oils, positives and negatives.

Positives (Qualities)

Bitter: characteristic flavour of oil obtained from greens olives, which must not be overly accentuated.

Harmonic: it is said of an oil whose fragrance, taste and fluidity components are in perfect balance.

Artichoke: flavour that recalls the taste of the tenderest part of the artichoke.

Sweet: in the case of delicate oils, the flavour tend to be sweet Flowers: Delicate flavour of white or yellow flowers, gives a delicate taste to the oil.

Fruity: an aroma of oil that reminds the scent and taste of a healthy, fresh and perfectly ripe fruit. Fruity can cover a range that extends from a lightly to a very intense (more pungent) degree.

Almond: typical almond flavour, fresh or dry. It is appreciated as a retro-olfactory sensation and is typically associated with sweet oils.

Ripe: characteristic flavour of ripe olives, often found in yellow oils with a round taste, tending to sweet.

Spicy: peppery sensation characteristic of oils produced at the beginning of the harvest, mainly from not fully ripe olives. It is also a characteristic of Sicilian olive oils.

Round: an attribute suitable for oil that has a full and balanced taste. Spices or vegetables or apple: when the dominant notes evoke these flavours and fragrances.

Green grass: when the oil has a taste that reminds the smell of freshly mowed grass; a positive attribute if the oil is smooth.

Negative (Defects)

Winy or vinegary: flavour recalling that of wine or vinegar, characterised by oils that have undergone a fermentative degeneration and the resulting formation of acetic acid, ethyl acetate and ethanol.

Cooked or overcooked: the oil odour of when has been exposed to high temperatures during the making process.

Hay or woody: characteristic odour of oils extracted from dried olives. Metallic: reminding of metal due to a pervasive or prolonged contact of olives with machinery during the making process

Sludgy: a defect in oils not properly filtered that through with sludge, results in unpleasant smells.

Mouldy: flavour found in oils extracted from olives harvested from the ground and stored for long in damp environments.

Rancid: flavour found in oxidised oils, that have been exposed to air and heat, it is accentuated with ageing.

Soily: flavour of oil obtained from olives harvested from the ground and not washed properly.

Done with the theory, it is now time to put into practice what you learned. Order your Italian olive varieties [map](#) and choose a couple of [extra virgin olive oils](#) to start your journey into the fascinating world of extra virgin olive oil and extra virgin olive oil will never be the same again. We stock some of the finest Italian olive oils, featuring a wide range of organic extra virgin options. All our oils are single estate and 100% Italian - none of our offerings are made from EU or Mediterranean olives. Each bottle represents the highest quality and authenticity, ensuring you enjoy only the best from Italy.